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ABSTRACT

This document discusses the various problems students and teachers face in Asian language education programs at both the elementary secondary and university levels. Asian languages are much more difficult to learn than more commonly-taught languages like French or Spanish, and the available curriculum and testing materials are inadequate. There also appears to be an overall lack of coordination and contact between elementary secondary schools and university Asian language educators, leading to the repetition of work done at lower levels in the university and high attrition rates. Finally, there is no resounding consensus on teaching and testing methods for many Asian languages. Despite these problems, the importance of Asian countries and the new emphasis on foreign language education make it probable that both Asian language programs and enrollment in these programs will continue to grow. (JL)

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IN THE ASIAN LANGUAGES MAZE

The growth of Asian languages in high schools and colleges in recent years is unprecedented. According to the Modern Languages Association the number of students taking Chinese rose to 16,891 in 1986, from 1,844 in 1960. The same year 23,454 students were enrolled in Japanese courses. Pre-college enrollment (grades 7 through 12) in 1985 was 3,409 in Chinese and 10,974 in Japanese. Numbers like these were unthinkable only a few years ago. "When I was in college only weirdos took Japanese," says a middle-aged Orientalist.

Credit for this goes in no small part to the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, which since 1984 has distributed over $2.5 million to 59 high schools to expand instruction in Chinese. No such infusion of seed money was needed for Japanese, whose growth was sparked ten years ago by American nervousness over Japanese economic competition. In the words of one Stanford professor: "The attraction here is money. It's the Silicon Valley syndrome."

Until a few years ago European languages dominated the scene even in Hawaii, whose orientation has historically been toward the east. Things have changed here too over the past few years. "Asian languages are really difficult," says a teacher at the Iolani School in Honolulu, where a large proportion of the student body is enrolled in Chinese and Japanese. "That's why we start them in seventh grade. It takes about three times longer to learn Chinese and Japanese than French or Spanish."

This is happening despite a host of hurdles facing students. Many colleges disregard the work done in high school by their entering students and most do not test entering students' achievement in any of the Asian languages. Nor does the Educational Testing Service (ETS) offer standardized tests. An ETS spokesperson explains that development costs for such a test are well over $250,000, and adds: "We'll never break even on this, but we're working on it." A test will be available several years from now, but for today's high schooler there is no opportunity to show off how much he knows. Many universities expect applicants to

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submit three achievement scores. "I have two strikes against me," complains one 11th grader with three years of Chinese plus a summer in Beijing. "I have to take some other achievement test to add up to three".

Few colleges are in the favored position of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, where many freshmen have just returned from Mormon missionary work. "These students have picked up 'street language' wherever they have been for the past two years, and we recognize that," says Professor Masakazu Watabe. "Our intermediate enrollment is much larger than at the elementary level. They speak and understand the language well. We teach them to read and write, and also the grammatical structures that hold it all together."

Some college professors consider high schools 'too mellow', as one West Coast academic sees it. "They don't teach good study habits. When students get to college they find out how hard the work is and they soon drop the language." Fifty percent attrition rates after the first year are not unusual. "This is survival of the fittest. If you don't do the work, you lose". Interestingly, on many campuses the top students in the 'hard' languages don't major in them. They are computer and science majors. "Give me scientists anytime," is an oft-heard preference in Asian language department offices. But not all agree. Some prefer students who share their interest in Chinese classics or Japanese women's poetry. Unfortunately majoring in an Asian language does not of itself open up many job opportunities. "What you need is an MBA in addition," says one Berkeley graduate whose Korean major left him stranded on the job marketplace.

It is a given of American education that there is little contact between high schools and colleges, even within a specific field. Frequently the only link between the two is the student. Masatoshi Shimano, a teacher of Japanese, states his amazement about one high school in California where the Japanese teacher doesn't even know his counterpart at the college across the street. Many high school teachers feel that college professors look down their noses at them, expecting them to teach the basics and produce only highly motivated students. One person who has worked on both sides of the chasm is Professor Cynthia Ning of the University of Hawaii at Manoa. After one year teaching at Punahou school, a top private school in Honolulu, Dr. Ning found the daily load of five classes a

heavy burden, compared to her one or two classes a day in college. She says: "My job at the high school was much more challenging because you are not responsible just for teaching the subject. You have to educate the whole child."

"One reason professors don't care about attrition rates," say high school teachers, "is that they've got tenure. We work hard to make these difficult languages attractive to students. Then they get to college and all they do is language and more language - no culture. It's too dry so they drop the language and all our work is for nothing." Learning the language alone is clearly not enough. Joshua Brooks, a sophomore at Yale, says: "I started Japanese in the tenth grade at St. Paul's (a private school in Concord, NH) then I spent a year at Seikei School in Tokyo. I was quite scared at first because I had no idea about many of the basic customs. I think culture is as important as the language." Still, he was placed into an advanced class at Yale. "At this point my future and the Japanese language are totally linked", he says, "thanks to my early start in high school".

The problems confronting students and teachers are many:
* The dearth of adequate materials forces high school teachers to adapt college texts and supplement them with materials of their own. Chinese Professor Kun Chen, formerly of Beijing and now at St. Paul's School, says: "It takes an enormous amount of time to write a good textbook. Where do you find the time when you teach five classes a day?" Dr. Ning, now back at the University of Hawaii, is developing Chinese materials for high schools, while Hiromi Peterson is taking a year off from Punahou school in Hawaii to write a Japanese text for her 10th and 11th graders.

* There is no agreement on the best approach to use. Some Chinese language teachers favor the Pin-Yin system of romanization, while others swear by the G.R. method (the two are incompatible). In Japanese many teachers feel that it's important to teach the kana (phonetic syllabaries) right from the start, yet the most widely used text is written entirely in the Roman alphabet.

* The profession is divided into proponents of 'achievement' and those who advocate 'proficiency'. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has published a set of

proficiency standards (applicable to all languages) for each of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Teaching for proficiency means teaching in context, creating lifelike situations using, for example, train schedules, restaurant menus, simulated telephone conversations, etc. But testing the level of proficiency is extremely time-intensive. It takes 20 to 30 minutes to establish the oral proficiency level of just one student. Multiply that by twenty or thirty students and it becomes unmanageable. To circumvent the problem some teachers use a hybrid, shorter 'pro-achievement' approach, adapting the ACTFL guidelines to the achievement approach. But no such formal standardized tests exist so here again teachers have to adapt, make do or write their own materials.

Technology may yet come to the rescue. The Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium (CALICO), based in Provo, Utah, is working on various computerized teaching and testing devices. One program allows the user to determine his level of achievement in 10 or 12 minutes with a computer programmed to act as an interviewer. "It boosts your morale when the machine tells you by how much your score has improved," says a student. Unfortunately this approach exists only for French and Spanish. Chinese and Japanese versions will probably not become available for some time yet. Professor Watabe of BYU, describing a Japanese reading-comprehension program he is developing, says: "It takes 15 to 20 hours to put together a twenty-minute exercise." Others across the country are also working on interactive videodiscs of foreign language movies. These let students watch a given scene over and over at will, slowing it down, calling up the written text of the dialogue, or any number of drills based on the scene. The possibilities of this technology are endless, but again time and cost are major obstacles to its rapid spread. Academics complain, too, that movie distributors are not very eager to let them use their blockbuster movies for free. "They want us to pay big royalties, which puts the whole thing pretty much out of anyone's reach."

Many of these problems are, of course, not unique to Asian language teachers. But "ours is a fledgling profession, which needs care and nurturing," argues Professor Ronald Walton of the University of Maryland, deputy director of the National Foreign Language Center in Washington, D.C. "Everybody has radically different notions about what they are doing. When you turn to someone for advice on any technical question you get polar opposite

answers. We are a collection of fragmented practitioners. There is no field yet. We need to form a field, to establish standards, to form a network." He sees many paths to the mountain and sympathizes with high school teachers who feel left out by the college people. "It's a different ball game in the high schools. Few people understand that."

Meanwhile the mountain keeps growing. Colleges which fifteen years ago were cutting back on foreign languages are now bringing them back. Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH, will reintroduce Japanese classes this fall. "We were actually one of the first colleges to have Japanese . . . back in 1906 to 1909," according to Professor Gene Garthwaite, head of the Asian studies department. "We feel very strongly that language, history and culture go together. We are adding someone in Japanese history as well as a person in language. We are prepared for high enrollments right from the start."

André Hurtgen

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